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THE SWEDES' LAST NIGHT AT PULTOWA.

BY CHARLES SHIELDSTREAM.

INTRODUCTORY AND CLOSING NOTE BY JOSIAH W. LEEDS.

The writer of the following epic is a native of Sweden, but for quite a number of years he has lived in Nebraska. He has made a study of the life and times of Charles XII., and has about finished the compilation of a narrative relating to that unsettled period of European history, and which he is desirous of having published. The poem appears as a prelude to the episode in question. I have taken the liberty to make a number of changes in the author's translation of his poem from the Swedish, that it may do better justice to the presumed smoothness of the original. I will add that the author's estimate of the character of the Swedish king seems not to be so favorable in his portrayal as is that given by some of his biographers. Carlyle, however, in referring to him, speaks of "that Swede and his mad life." When we consider his surroundings as the ruler of a professedly Christian State, the fierce wars in which he was engaged and the long train of miseries resultant therefrom, and, further, when we contemplate the fact that his military exploits are made great account of by his people to the present day, and serve to keep aflame the warlike spirit, we may readily ask ourselves whether Charles the Swede is, in fact, any less deserving the epithet of "scourge" than is the Tartar, Tamerlan. How entirely accurate, therefore, the estimate following may be, I leave, simply adding that Charles had eagerly plunged into war when in his teens, and that he was still but twenty-seven years of age when (in 1709) he encountered his memorable defeat at the hands of Peter, who is styled "The Great."

Still night, the hour of rest, now wholly
Has settled o'er the wasted plain,
Where Warskła's water ripples lowly
Along the camps of monarchs twain:
This battle-eve, so still, will not in
Two nations' memory be forgotten.

The suffering and hard privation
That men endured here with their king,
Has not been matched by any nation
Where heroes fight and poets sing:
The faith which for their chief they cherished,
Preserves his name, though theirs have perished.

But he, unfeeling, cold, unyielding
Like th' icy peak to storms that blow,
Which down its sides, so slippery, wielding
The avalanches of the snow,
Stands unaffected by the thunder
That tears below the woods asunder.

The waning moon in its last quarter
Gleams on Pultowa's bloodstained soil,
Where, centuries ago, the Tartar,
Grim Tamerlan, his sinuous coil
'Round western nations twined, intending
To spoil and ravage past amending.¹

And now come sounds of dying, groaning,
Making night dismal unto man,
And weird winds low, and sadly moaning,
Seem echoing ghosts from Tamerlan:
Breaks the death silence little else—
Scarce heard the voice of sentinels.

Infection loads the sultry breezes
From gory bodies in decay,
On fleet wings hovering, fell diseases,
Light stealthily upon their prey,
And death prowls 'round and with impatience
Anticipates the morrow's rations.

No dew falls lightly on the meadow,
To cool the earth's corrupted breath,
But o'er it hangs the lurid shadow,
Whose gloom involves the "vale of Death."
Thus nature presages disaster
Which human reason fails to master.

Pultowa! but for despot leaders,
Thy day had been averted then!
Alas! that such prolific breeders
Of fell dissensions amongst men
Should stir one people 'gainst another,
Till, Cain-like, man will slay his brother.

And nations then in conflict mingle,
And thus each other learn to hate:
Why? That the bronze of fame may jingle
Round the statues of "the great,"
And men to murderous strife be guided,
That chiefs with honors be provided.

Must fighting out two tyrants' grudges
Make two whole nations suffer wrong?
Had *these* brave men been their own judges
The war would not have lasted long,¹
And neither side had been so willing
To suffer death or do the killing.

The ages plunge into black error,
Mankind runs mad in carnage wild,
And through the world rolls Ruin's terror,
Tho' people still be reconciled—
Made well-nigh willing to surrender
The hate that brings their monarch splendor.

One glimpse of day! The Russ victorious
Looks with regret on such a foe,
And sighs to think that one so glorious
Should meet with such an overthrow—
So used was he to meet disaster,
It almost grieved him to be master.

In coming years, but yet in pity,
He'll wonder at their sudden fall
At whose report the old domed city
Of Moscow, shook within its wall,
And almost wish a different story²
Portrayed Pultowa's claim to glory.

The Swedes had for years prayed their king to make peace,
and his officers had sought to dissuade him from the Russian war.

² "A different story" very lately has been told, and strangely too, by the Russian Count, Leo Tolstoi, whose domain of many acres, lies south of Moscow, not far, indeed, from where "Warskła's water" flows. Tolstoi having given up his soldier's life, as well as his favorite employment of fiction writing, now devotes his time to the peaceful concerns of agriculture, and to the preparation of essays, which he believes will benefit his fellow-men: a remarkable change which was brought about by the reading of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and especially by a consideration of that passage of it which begins, "I say unto you, that ye resist not evil."

—*Messenger of Peace.*

Dr. McKenzie tells a good story of the Indians who replied, when a missionary asked them if they were willing to abstain from work on Sundays: "Yes, and not only on Sundays but on all other days as well!" We have seen similar white folks.—*Christian Union.*